

Brave People Change their Minds

Ross Welcome to Renegade, Inc. We live in times where we are acutely aware of prejudice, which we rightly point a finger at. But why is it that we are less likely to acknowledge the three fingers pointing back at ourselves that flag our unintentional bias?

Ross Pragya Agarwal, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Pragya Agarwal Thank you. Lovely to be here.

Ross 'Sway, Unravelling Unconscious Bias'. What is unconscious bias and are we just slavishly caught by it or can we get rid of it?

Pragya Agarwal So unconscious bias is a bias or these kind of biases or prejudices that we hold within us that we are not explicitly aware of. We might not even acknowledge them, but they are mostly hidden and they manifest in the way we interact with other people or affect our decisions and interactions with people as well. So I see that these kind of individual biases that we carry as a product of some of the systemic and structural biases and prejudices that exist in a society which are from our history and legacy and also the policies that are there. But it's like a cycle because these systemic and structural things affect how the stereotypes that we form, the generalise assumptions that we form of other people, these biases that we carry, these are deeply entrenched and ingrained in us, but we are not often aware of them. And they manifest in kind of implicit ways, sometimes, not often in an explicit manner. And these biases that we carry, affect our interpersonal relationships, but they also reinforce some of the systemic biases that exist in this society. We do carry these around. Some of these are cognitive shortcuts that help us make decisions and process a lot of information that's coming at us. And so in that way, it is beneficial because they reduce the mental load, but we cannot be completely cured of them. But we do have a responsibility to be aware of them, especially that is affecting our interactions with people and our decisions. And that is especially those that are reinforcing some of these inequalities that are existing in our society.

Ross Often on social media accounts - and I know that you've looked at social media quite closely because it's a really good testing ground or working surface to understand people's unconscious bias - all views my own. Using your thesis, the likelihood is that those views aren't their own.

Pragya Agarwal And we all like to believe that we are interacting independently of the systems that we are a project of. And yes, we are forming views on our own. And I think that's a good thing because I think people are taking responsibility for their actions and views rather than saying that I'm just echoing what other people are saying. But we do have a responsibility to understand that our views are often a product of things we have learnt, the views that we've picked up, the experiences that have shaped us. So the media messaging that we get, the messaging we get from politicians, that show us and tell us and we form these stereotypes. For instance, I give a very powerful example about Hurricane Katrina and these two news items that came up quite closely. One had a black man who was wading through floodwaters and he was carrying a pack of bread under his arm and absolute devastation all

around them. And the headline said, A black man wades through floodwaters after looting the nearby grocery store, while in another photograph there are two white people who were doing the same. They're wading through these floodwaters with some of their belongings and the headline said, there are two white people wading through floodwaters after finding food in the nearby grocery store. So what is this message that's giving us and what of our views are shaped by those messages because the message is that black people loot and white people find? And the journalists confirmed that they didn't know anything about the context of these people when they actually wrote it. So that's showing that their views are actually their own, but still a product of these stereotypes that have been shaped by the system. And then when we read these messages, we create those assumptions within our brain. We are more fearful of people of a certain skin colour. And that is why so much research has shown that black men, in particular, are more associated with aggressiveness and criminality. And that shapes how the legal system or the police view them as well.

Ross What do you say to those people who say, actually, we can't do anything about it because this is fundamentally how I'm wired. This is how I've evolved, I'm a product of my evolutionary past?

Pragya Agarwal What I say to them is to perhaps read more about it and educate yourself because that is just a lazy excuse. I think that's a really lazy way of looking at it. That's a game kind of shirking of any responsibility, accountability. And I think sometimes people who hold the most racist and sexist views actually firmly believe that this is no fault of theirs. This is how they are wired. And I think sometimes media plays on these kind of myths as well saying that this is from our evolutionary past, that we are designed to be racist or be designed to be sexist. There is a biological basis to how races exist or how genders or sex exist. And I think using science as an excuse or using evolutionary theories as an excuse, is that is an excuse in itself. So I think we all have a responsibility to educate ourselves. We all have a responsibility to learn. We all have a responsibility to reflect on our actions and understand that the impact of our actions matter. We might not have the intentionality of being racist or sexist, and we can sometimes excuse that by saying, well, I didn't mean it like that. But it is the impact of the action that really, really matters. And we need to focus on that.

Ross You talk in your work about the speed of the bias as in our brains work so incredibly quickly to confirm our biases. How does that happen? How does that sort of clatter in the grey matter happen, exactly?

Pragya Agarwal Yeah, I mean, we all are trying - and neuro scientists are even trying - to figure out how some of these processes happen. A neuro imaging is showing us how different parts of our brain act in different ways when we react with familiar and unfamiliar situations. But we do know that the information is coming at a really great speed at us, especially now that we are bombarded with information and our brains don't have the capacity to deal with all the information in a very rational, logical manner. So a lot of that information is processed really quickly, especially when we're tired and distracted or in a hurry. Like, for instance, I'm scrolling social media and standing in a queue in a coffee shop. I'm distracted by a number of things. I quickly like something. I quickly need to eat something, and those things are validated by our past experiences, our past memories. And it's kind of what I talk about in the book as the dual processing theory. We've seen that there's a system one and system two processing. And in system one, we are quickly just doing kind of a visual matching, using

these shortcuts in the brain so that we can reduce the mental load because we can't process every bit of information that's coming to us by weighing up all the options logically and rationally. So we process a lot of the information against matching it against these kind of templates that already exist in our brain - these pathways. These pathways are kind of shaped by past experiences and memories, which is why I say that biases are learnt through life, which is why I also believe that biases and prejudices can be unlearned, because if we learn them, we can unlearn them as well. And that has been shown by the neuroplasticity research as well that our brains are constantly being adapted and moulded according to our experiences. And so when we're matching these against these templates, this is when we can re-employ or activate some of the stereotypes that we carry in our brain. And this can lead, is more likely to lead, to biases, because when we carry these generalized assumptions and stereotypes and match new information against it, we don't take the time to actually assess and evaluate every bit of information in its right context.

Video clip (Jonathan Kahn) I think amongst some of the major risks, I guess, with the focus on implicit bias is primarily with using it to explain too much, right? So the idea is to my mind, that implicit bias is a very real thing. It's a significant phenomenon that's worthy of analysis and discussion, but particularly in the US over the last 20, 30 years, it's kind of risen to this level of a master narrative for addressing or discussing race relations. And so it's been kind of a default go-to mechanism, right, that whenever there was a racial incident in the past, like something bad happened. Oh, know, we would sort of default. Or especially, I would say kind of white liberal establishment would default to this idea, oh, it's implicit bias, right? Actually, there's actually a really good example of this, that during the 2016 debates you had between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, there's a question about police brutality, because in the aftermath of Mike Brown and other other police killings and she said, oh, yes, you know, implicit bias, and they said you know is it a problem with implicit bias with the police. So Hillary said, oh, yes, there is an implicit bias with police. We all have an implicit bias. There is this problem of implicit bias. We all have it.

Video clip (PBS News Hour host) Do you believe that police are implicitly biased against black people?

Video clip (Hillary Clinton) Lester, I think implicit bias is a problem for everyone, not just police. I think, unfortunately, too many of us in our great country jump to conclusions about each other.

Video clip (Jonathan Kahn) And that in sort of a nut shell is one of my concerns about this default mode of implicit bias because it lets us off the hook. Because it's the idea of saying instead of calling something racist and owning it and being accountable for it, you call it implicit bias, which is primarily a cognitive state, right? It's a psychological state that is internalised that you're unconscious of, right? It's also called unconscious bias. So how can I be responsible for something I'm not conscious of? And there's a wonderful contrast between that and the response to the George Floyd killing, right? I'm currently in Minneapolis now, so I was here when it happened. I went to some of the protests after it. And the response was very significantly different, in particular, the discussion of the need for structural reforms for police. And one of the reasons I think that the response, especially to George Floyd is so indicative about the limitations of implicit bias as a frame, is we see here the frame of implicit bias breaking down, which I think is great. And one of the ways I think it broke

down - this really struck me when I was watching the horrific video of George Floyd's killing which took me a long time to actually sit and watch through. You're there - I think especially for white viewers, white, liberal or left viewers - and you're watching this officer shoving his knee on George Floyd's neck. And it's not just that, but he's staring at you with the camera on for a long time. And I think what sort of broke for a lot of well-meaning white liberals in that moment was, he's looking at you, right? He's inviting you into a gaze of complicity. And if you don't do something, you are complicit. And it forced people to confront their complicity. And that's why I think the responses to George Floyd's killing were so multiracial and gave so many people hope because it broke down the facade of I'm not responsible, it's just implicit bias, everybody's got it. It's realising that if I don't do something, I don't call for substantive structural reforms, I don't try to hold somebody accountable, then I'm complicit in this racism. And so the narrative of implicit bias was a way of glossing over the sort of dominant white culture's complicity in persistent white supremacy.

Ross Is it possible that we can ever completely rid ourselves of our unconscious bias?

Pragya Agarwal I think this is a big question and I keep discussing that and talking about it and reflecting on it. I don't think we can ever get real clear, unconscious biases because some of these biases, these cognitive biases, these shortcuts, are actually really helpful for us in everyday life, to be able to make decisions. But we really have to question some of these biases that can lead to negative prejudices and discrimination. So biases in itself can be positive as well in terms of having a positive bias towards my children, every parent thinking that their children are the smartest or the cleverest or the funniest. And that's kind of a nurturing instinct that we all have. But unless that positive bias creates some kind of negative discrimination against another group of people, that in itself, is not harmful. So we have to really assess whether our positive biases towards members of our sports team or another person who follows the same football team is creating a discrimination against somebody actively. And then we have to really assess some of these biases that we hold.

Ross When you were talking about unconscious bias, do you think about intuition? Because we're often told to go with our gut feeling - don't overthink things, you know, go with what feels right. Do you introduce intuition into your work?

Pragya Agarwal Yes, I mean, that's a really interesting link. And I tackle that in the book as well about how we are told often to trust our instincts, to trust your gut instinct, to trust our judgments of people from our first impressions. But we have to be cautious and careful, because when we are doing that, however beneficial it might be in certain context, we are inevitably falling back on our system-one processing where we are falling back on our learned experiences, our memories, these generalised assumptions, these templates that we hold of people. And so we have to be careful that we are not activating some of the stereotypes that we have without weighing up these different options that we have. And, for instance, I talk about in the book a case about medical and healthcare professionals and doctors and nurses that themselves talk about how when they are tired, they're rushed off their feet, of course, all the time, they don't have the time or the mental capacity to really assess every bit of information right there and then in the most rational manner. So they have to trust these learned experiences, this library that they hold in their brain and match information according to that, which means that sometimes errors can creep in, which means that sometimes stereotypes are activated. There is an opportunity for both our gut instinct and

our rational judgement to exist together. And we have to really be careful about what context we are making a decision and how important that decision is and what the implications of that decision are before we think about falling back on our gut instincts.

Video clip (Jonathan Kahn) The primary example for me of implicit bias being used as a way to explain away sort of what really is racism or deeper structural problems. One of the clear examples of this for me was a couple of years ago - a big incident at Starbucks that got a lot of attention in the news. There was a Philadelphia Starbucks where these two black guys came in and sat down. They were waiting for a third guy. They were having a discussion over some business thing. And the manager of the Starbucks came over and said, are you going to order anything? And they said, no, we're just waiting here for a third guy. And then she said, you've got to order something or you've gotta go. They said, look, we're just waiting here. And so then she goes back and she calls the cops and the cops come and you see that when the cops come on the video, they come and talk to these guys. They handcuff them. They take them outside. They're like eight cops there for two totally peaceful, non disruptive, black guys. And so the video went viral. And there's this big uproar about, you know, this is terrible. And the response of Starbucks was, OK, we're shutting down all our stores to do implicit bias training on the app, you know, on an app one afternoon in there. And on the one hand, you know, more power to Starbucks. They're trying to do something. I appreciate it. On the other hand, I actually, you know, checked out they put the modules on online what they were doing. And again, it was all about psychology and cognition, nothing about deeper structural issues of racism. And the thing is, in that story of what happened in Starbucks, that was not a case of implicit bias. It was a case of racism. Implicit bias is something that happens in a precognitive level that you're not unconscious of. You're not conscious of it. You're not able to control. You know, you hear the story of what happened in Starbucks. There's the manager saw these guys walk in and sit down. She walked up to them. She talked to them. She went, you know, back and forth. And she goes back to her station. She picks up the phone. She calls the cops. The cops come, They talk to the guy. There's a back and forth. They handcuff the guy. They walked him out. There is no implicit bias. There's nothing precognitive happening in any of that. It is all racism. And this is one of the deeper problems. There is a difference between unconscious bias and simple denial or lack of recognition of one's own racism, right? Stereotypes in some degree operate at a precognitive level, but they also operate at a conscious cognitive level. We're all aware of stereotypes we hold, but we're just not willing to sort of do the work to sort of address them. And so that for me is a really clear example of the discourse around the Starbucks incident. It was all around implicit bias but it was racism. And it's important to call something out for what it is, because when you call it racism, it's situates it in a specific historical context and practice of the legacy of 400 years of racial anti-black suppression in this country. And realising this is simply, this is part of that legacy. And there's a big difference between implicit bias training and historical education about the legacies of racism.

Ross Most of us are on autopilot for a lot of the time. Give us and viewers watching this, give us a exercise or some kind of mental checklist or a device, if you would, for us to unravel our unconscious bias and put a stop on it, because a lot of people walking around say, oh, I haven't got unconscious bias, I'm absolute tabula rasa, I'm angelic. But actually we know that just simply isn't the case. So what can people do on a practical level because, you know, as you put in the book, this comes in so very quickly?

Pragya Agarwal Yes. I think, for instance, think about the six people that you're closest friends with and you will realise that there's a lot of confirmation bias in how we have our friendship groups or the people we choose to work with. They're most likely the closest people to us who look like us, act like us and talk like us. So there is a bias in the way we choose people. Think about your social media community and tribe. Are these the people who are like you? Exactly. And think like you as well. So that's how we create echo chambers and we trust their judgments. We read the books that they are reading, that they're recommending and we talk about it as a tribe, like I'm creating my tribe. Some of these tribal instincts can create a fear of what is unfamiliar, what is outside your group. And that's how these ingroup outgroup mentalities are created. These are divisive lines. And so although we do all have an instinct to have this kind of in groups, that can actually create a fear or a kind of a heightened bias against those who are not part of this. So, for instance, if you're walking down a park in the dark and you see a group of young men walking towards you, how likely is it that you're going to cross over on the other side of the road because you have a certain stereotype or an assumption of what this group of young people are going to be like, especially if they are black men. Are you going to clutch your handbag more closely? Are you going to bring your child more closely towards you? And that's another social cue that you're giving your child as well, which they're going to pick up this social cue and they're going to understand or learn that there is something to be fearful of certain people who look a certain way. So every action that we take, a lot of these are predetermined by some of these stereotypes that we carry, these templates.

Ross And so the present moment is free from all the bias and free from all the shackles of the past. The present moment is our best friend in all this, isn't it?

Pragya Agarwal So yes. But I think our learned experiences and our memories are very important as well, because that can help us create a sense of place and belonging and identity. And so we do fall back on it. We do rely on it. For example, this whole conversation around statues that's happening at the moment. And I recently started looking at it about how important are these statues in creating a collective memory and what should we do about them. And some of these landmarks that we have, these urban milestones, the statues that we have around them, they are a symbol to us about the past and they help us create a collective memory, which is really important for our mental health because that sense of belonging is important for our mental and physical well-being. But what we have to do is to examine these things, examine our past memories, and our learned behaviours and reflect on them. For instance, with these statues, we have to think about whose interpretation of the past are we believing in. Whose interpretation? Because past is set in stone but history isn't. We are recreating history and people are telling us a version of the history. So we have to really question and examine it. I think the important thing is to question the status quo, because sometimes when we get set into a pattern, it creates a sense of discomfort to step outside these comfort zones to even question that. And I think that's why we see so much resistance against anybody talking about racism or anti-racist movements or anybody even talking about unconscious bias, because it makes people uncomfortable. It makes people reflect on their privileges and their status quo, which is hugely uncomfortable. And so I think the best thing is to question the status quo.

Ross I want to finish by asking you to help me out. A couple of days ago, I had a thought about a very specific outcome that I needed. It was about economics. It was about the UK. So

I went online and I went and found a story. It took me about two and a half hours that eventually confirmed my economic, my bias, my argument, about a specific economic topic. How do I stop doing that?

Pragya Agarwal Yeah, I think that happens to all of us, because...

Ross Two and a half hours.

Pragya Agarwal Yeah. And I think that happens to all of us. And I think as scientists and academics, we are led to believe that we are objective. Just everybody, I think, is more likely to find information, believe information or trust information that's confirming our views. And it's really impossible to get rid of it completely because that's what we do. We look for information, we spot information. We give it more weight, unconsciously, weight against those which disconfirm our views. Our best hope is to actually, if you have the time, if you have two and a half hours, make a list of things, actually read them carefully and think about why you're trying to confirm this view rather than disconfirm it. Actually find out actively information that's disconfirming it. That doesn't mean that the other view is the right view. But at least we have a responsibility to engage with it, to see what data and evidence that it has, what stats it has, what it is trying to tell us. And we're all rushed in a hurry. And we do that all the time. We find information that is more appealing to us, is what confirms our views.

Ross Is awareness, then, the first step to all this?

Pragya Agarwal Absolutely. Awareness and acknowledgement of it. So for instance, if I talk about privilege or white privilege, people really get very defensive about it. Or if I talk about biases and stereotypes, people get really uncomfortable about it. But being aware and acknowledging the fact that we are all biased. And I hope that the book - that's why I wanted to write it - is I really wanted to make people reflect on their biases in kind of a non-judgmental way and to say with empathy and compassion that I am biased and so are you. We are all biased. What we can do is to be aware of it and then start noticing when our biases are coming into play. Another activity that we can do is to step actively into another person's shoes, kind of a metaphorically speaking, not literally. But that research has shown that actually it creates more empathy and compassion towards the person. So when we talk about microaggression sometimes or people excusing their behaviours and not understanding how that impacts other people, when you actually think about it from the other person's perspective and take a different view on it, then you are more likely to understand and believe how our actions and words can be impacting other people and why they might have a racist or sexist undertone or any other kind of bias built into it. So I think those are really the first steps we can adopt.

Ross Dr. Pragya Agarwal, thank you very much for your time.

Pragya Agarwal Thank you so much.